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West Germany: Public Opinion and the Election

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Summary

Chancellor Kohl's coalition government appears headed toward a solid victory in the election on 25 January, but his Christian Democratic Union continues to face serious long-term challenges. This memorandum examines West German public opinion on the parties' strengths and weaknesses and on key election issues. Our conclusions are based on data from two of West Germany's leading polling firms, EMNID and the Institut fuer Demoskopie Allensbach, supplemented by various other opinion surveys.

Most major campaign issues favor the coalition parties:

- The economy is their strongest asset. Voters increasingly credit the Kohl government with West Germany's economic recovery and zero-percent inflation. While unemployment remains West Germans' top concern, most consider the opposition no more competent to reduce it than the government.
- The Christian Democrats apparently have neutralized the Social Democratic Party's campaign on the environment, even though their support for nuclear energy remains highly unpopular.

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This paper was prepared by West European Division, Office of European Analysis. Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to Chief, West European Division

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-- Security issues currently are a net minus for the government, but their electoral impact is likely to be small. A large minority of voters believes that Kohl's policies have not promoted peace, and growing numbers of West Germans are critical of Alliance arms control positions. By contrast, few voters object to the Social Democrats' independent arms discussions with the East. [REDACTED]

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Voters' views of the parties' general competence also are a major asset for the coalition. The Christian Democrats have overcome their earlier problems resulting from Chancellor Kohl's reputation [REDACTED], in part because of the popularity of other party leaders. Meanwhile, the Social Democrats' internal divisions and a labor union scandal have caused a recent plunge in the party's standing in the polls. [REDACTED]

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At the same time, survey data highlight long-term vulnerabilities of the Christian Democrats. Many voters consider them too supportive of the United States and less competent than the opposition in managing relations with the East. Further, the Christian Democrats are extremely weak among both the youngest age group and voters now in their thirties and early forties. Neither problem will be decisive in this election. Both could become liabilities for the CDU/CSU in the 1990s, however, if present trends continue and the party does not take steps to distance itself from US policies and appeal more strongly to younger voters. [REDACTED]

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The Parties' Standings

A variety of opinion surveys put the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) between 46 and 48 percent, their Free Democratic (FDP) coalition partners between 5 and 8 percent, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) between 35 and 38 percent, and the Greens between 7 and 11 percent. The most recent figures mark a drop for the Social Democrats, who had polled in the low forties throughout most of 1986. The relative strength of the government and opposition has changed less, however, because many disaffected Social Democrats apparently switched to the Greens. (see graph) 

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Polls also show a drastic shift in public expectations of the election's outcome. Respondents in a poll last April said by almost a two-to-one margin that the political climate favored the Social Democrats; in November, an even larger majority said it favored the CDU/CSU. In another poll in late November, two-thirds said they expected the Kohl government to win reelection, while only 12 percent expected a combined SPD-Green majority. Nonetheless, this strong trend in favor of the Christian Democrats is unlikely to win them an absolute majority. In fact, recent polls suggest that their current strength is causing complacency among Christian Democratic activists while raising concerns among the large majority of voters who favor a coalition to a one-party government. 

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The Economy

The economy has been the most important substantive issue in the election. Media attention has focused on unemployment, which remains above 2 million despite a slight decline in 1986, and poll respondents consistently cite it at the country's most important problem. At the same time, the Kohl government can claim a series of economic successes, including price stability, tax cuts, smaller budget deficits, and a moderate rate of economic growth. 

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On balance, the economy almost certainly will help the ruling parties, although less than the favorable data on West Germany's GNP growth, inflation rate, and government finances might suggest. Surveys find that while most West Germans now believe the economy generally is improving, they

credit international factors -- such as the fall in oil prices and in the dollar exchange rate -- more than Kohl government initiatives. Pluralities also say the situation of farmers, renters, and low-income persons has deteriorated under the Kohl administration. Even so, polls show that support for the government's economic policies has grown significantly since 1985, while the Social Democrats' lack of a coherent economic program undermines their ability to attack the government on issues such as unemployment. (see Tables 1 and 2)

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Energy and the Environment

The environment continues to be a top concern of West German voters, particularly because of the Chernobyl accident and a series of recent chemical spills in the Rhine River. Social Democratic attempts to exploit environmental issues in the campaign, however, have had only limited success. In a poll published last month, for instance, fewer than a third of the respondents were critical of the government's reaction to the massive release of poisons into the Rhine by a Swiss factory in November. Sixty percent did agree that environmental quality had declined over the past few years, but in other surveys the Christian Democrats have received slightly higher marks than the SPD for ability to handle environmental problems -- with both major parties trailing far behind the Greens.

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Polls find overwhelming opposition to the construction of new nuclear power plants, which the Christian Democrats continue to support. Although few voters favor an immediate abandonment of nuclear energy -- the Greens' proclaimed objective -- most prefer a gradual transition to other power sources, as advocated by the SPD. The issue apparently has not cost the CDU significant support, however, despite a temporary decline in the party's ratings following the Kohl government's initial confused reaction to Chernobyl accident. This probably is due in part to the Social Democrats' continuing disagreements about the issues, which have left many labor union leaders skeptical of the party's official opposition to the construction of new nuclear power plants.

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Foreign and Security Policy

Arms control and foreign policy have not become decisive factors in the campaign. Few poll respondents mention

foreign or security issues as top concerns, and peace movement activities have declined dramatically since INF deployments began in 1983. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, security issues apparently are a net minus for the government. An Allensbach poll last April, for example, found that a plurality of 39 percent believed peace had become less secure since 1982, with 15 percent directly blaming the Kohl administration. Fewer than half of the respondents were aware that the government had permitted INF deployment, but, of these, over three-quarters were opposed. In addition, surveys show that conservative attacks on the Social Democrats' independent arms control discussions with Eastern Europe have had little impact; in fact, the minority aware of the discussions overwhelmingly approved them. (see Table 3) [redacted]

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Images of the Major Parties

A key advantage of the Christian Democrats in the election is likely to be their reputation for effectiveness. Electoral studies show that the party had widespread support in 1983 from voters who disagreed with it on most issues but considered it more competent than the Social Democrats. Polls find that a slight plurality of voters still considers the CDU/CSU the party best equipped to handle West Germany's major problems. Even on issues stressed by the opposition, such as unemployment, the nuclear threat, and the environment, respondents consider the Christian Democrats to be about as effective as the SPD. [redacted]

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Other surveys confirm the public's higher regard for the Christian Democratic leadership. For instance, Christian Democrats consistently dominate the list of West Germany's most respected politicians in monthly EMNID polls. Even Chancellor Kohl's personal popularity now is higher than that of SPD chancellor candidate Johannes Rau and far exceeds that of any other Social Democrat. [redacted]

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The continuing financial difficulties of the union-owned Neue Heimat housing conglomerate are reinforcing the Social Democrats' reputation for incompetence, according to press commentaries on recent state elections in Bavaria and Hamburg. Although the party has no direct connection with Neue Heimat, several SPD-led state governments are under fire for attempting to bail out parts of the bankrupt enterprise with public funds. More generally, the party is

embarrassed because of its traditionally close association with organized labor. The Social Democrats, for example, generally back legislation supported by the unions, and most party leaders are union members. [redacted]

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Recent internal dissension in the SPD also has seriously hurt the party's image. Various Social Democrats have publicly contradicted Rau's views and campaign strategy, and polls show the party deeply split over a national coalition with the Greens. As a result, voters increasingly view the SPD as hopelessly at odds with itself. In an Allensbach poll in November, for example, 45 percent said the SPD was divided while only 28 percent said it was generally united -- almost the exact reverse of poll results in January 1986. (see bar chart) [redacted]

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Long-Term Vulnerabilities of the CDU

While the Christian Democrats have the edge, their close identification with the United States and their weakness among young voters are growing long-term concerns for the party. Neither problem is likely to offset the party's advantages in the 1987 election, but they could become major weaknesses if current opinion trends continue into the 1990s. [redacted]

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Relations with the United States. Many voters accept the opposition's contention that the Kohl government is aligned too closely with the United States. In one recent survey, over one-third of the respondents said the government supports US foreign policy too strongly; almost none said it does not support them enough. At the same time, the Social Democrats are comparatively invulnerable to charges of anti-Americanism. Although the SPD routinely castigates a wide range of US actions, fewer than one-quarter said the party does not support Washington's foreign policy strongly enough. [redacted]

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These results, in our judgment, mirror a broader shift in attitudes on security and foreign policy. Even as a large majority of West Germans continues to support membership in NATO, a growing number are critical of US leadership of the Alliance and favor political equidistance between Washington and Moscow. So far, the Christian Democrats have responded by dissenting from various US policies while continuing to stress their strong support for close ties to Washington. If current opinion trends

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constrained to become even more critical of the United States, and even then their traditional pro-US image may become a growing liability. [REDACTED]

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Young Voters. Support for the Christian Democrats among young voters remains extremely weak. In an Allensbach poll published in December, only 36 percent of those aged from 18 to 29 said the CDU/CSU is their favorite party -- fewer than among any other age group. By contrast, 15 percent supported the Greens and 43 percent favored the Social Democrats. An EMNID survey last month had similar results: the SPD and Greens had a combined majority of 60 percent among those under 30 while the Christian Democrats polled 36 percent and the Free Democrats only four percent. [REDACTED]

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The survey findings thus cast doubt on press reports that claim a conservative trend among West German youth. The growing stress on personal material success noted by some observers clearly is not resulting in more moderate stands on key political issues. Various recent surveys, for example, found that the 18- to 24-year age group is the most likely to support the Greens, oppose nuclear energy, and reject SDI. This group also is the most likely to consider the Kohl government too pro-US and to support SPD arms control initiatives. We cannot rule out a more conservative posture among West Germans still in their mid-teens, but we suspect that exposure to the universities and the mass media will move many now in this age group to the left. [REDACTED]

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West Germany: Trends in Party Strengths

Percent

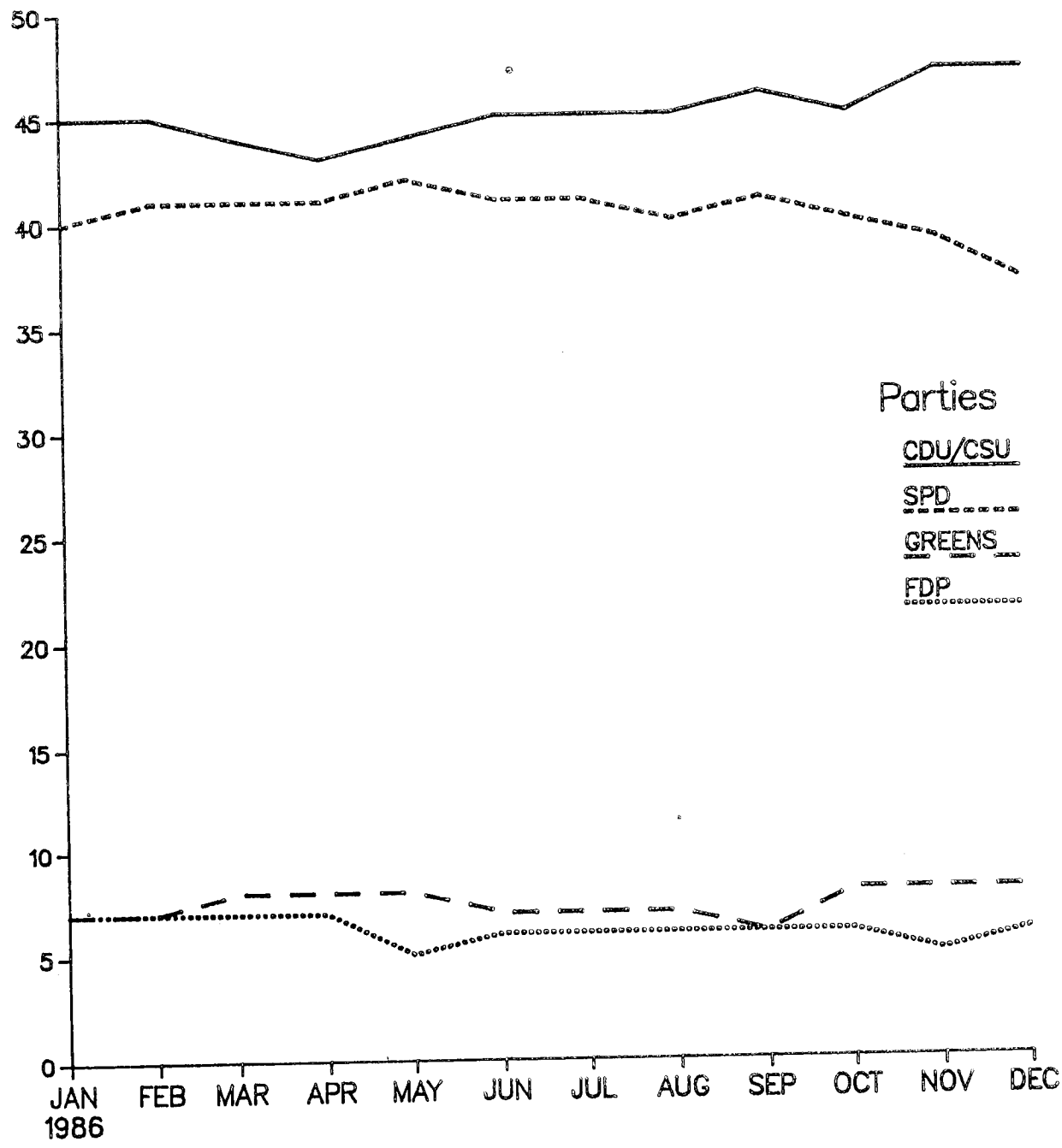


Table 1: Kohl's Record on the Economy

	(percent)	
	improvement since 1982	achievement of Kohl government
Inflation	58	39
Economic situation	47	34
Government debt	45	39
Exports	37	18
	deterioration since 1892	fault of Kohl government
Government-union relations	68	55
Unemployment	59	23
Situation of farmers	57	20
Situation of low- income persons	48	33
Number of apprenticeships	45	19
Security of pensions	35	13
Tax burden	26	15

Source: Institut fuer Demoskopie Allensbach,
August 1986

Table 2: Reasons for the Economic Recovery

	Total	CDU/CSU	FDP	SPD	Greens
Primarily government policies	31	65	46	6	6
Primarily international factors	45	18	30	75	73

Source: Institue fuer Demoskopie Allensbach,
August 1986

Public Views of Parties' Internal Cohesion

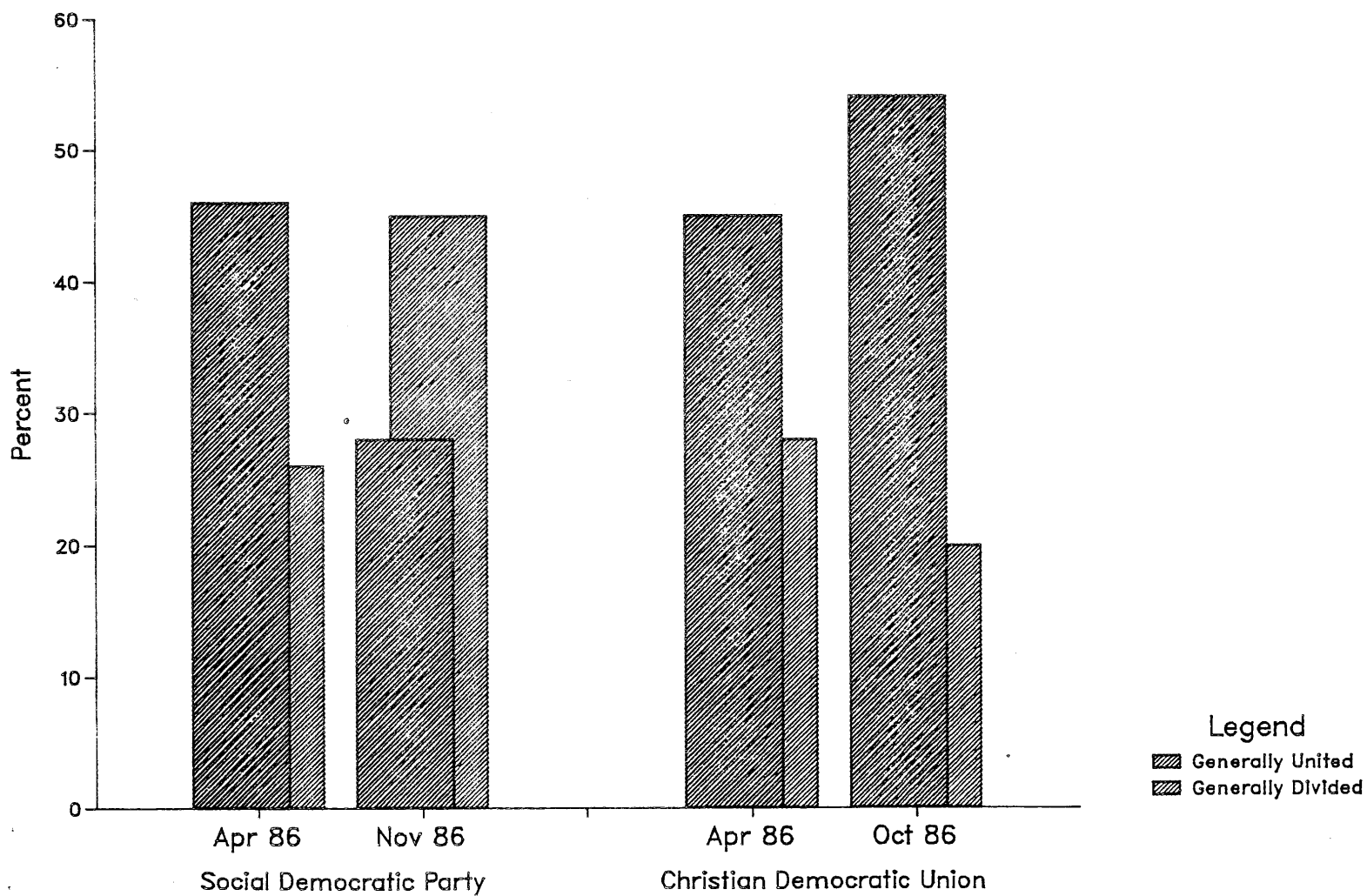


Table 3: Views on Selected Arms Control Issues

Which side shows greater interest
in nuclear arms reductions?

United States	11
Soviet Union	27
Both equally	61

Effects of INF Deployments

increase our military security	27
decrease our military security	36
no opinion	36

Opinions on SDI

favor	22
oppose	54
no opinion	24

opposed to SDI: ~

CDU/CSU voters	36
SPD voters	72
FDP voters	57
Greens voters	83
18-24 years	65
25-29	59
30-44	59
45-59	50
60 and over	46

Source: EMNID, November 1986